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homemakers' chat
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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1944

Subject: "MARTHA WASHINGTON, HOMEMAKER." Information from sources provided by Mr. Everett Edwards of Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Today is the anniversary of George Washington's birthday, and it's only natural to be thinking about the man who led this nation in our first fight for freedom. But from a woman's point of view, perhaps today's a good time, too, for a look back at Mrs. George Washington, to see how that early war affected the life of the first First Lady of our country.

Martha Washington was brought up, in the tradition of her time, to be a good housekeeper, manager, and hostess. In those days, managing a house was a big job, especially for a woman in her position, with dozens of servants to supervise, and a large home to look after. And of course the farms then were almost self-sufficient, so it was part of the homemaker's job to see that the servants ground the flour, killed the meat, raised the poultry, wove the cloth, and did all the other necessary jobs of producing food and clothing... in addition to the work of getting meals, cleaning house, and caring for the children.

Martha Washington was a woman who deeply loved her home. But, just like many women today, she saw her home broken up by war. Her husband was away at war for almost eight and a half years... for six years he didn't even get home for a visit, and when he did come back, it was for only a few days at a time.

Like many service wives of today, Martha spent as much time as she could at camp with her husband. During the winters the fighting was more or less at a standstill, so she would go to the army's winter quarters. As a result, she spent about half the duration of the war away from Mount Vernon.

Whenever she was in winter quarters with the army, Martha devoted herself

to helping the fighting men-- she visited hospitals, helped take care of sick and wounded soldiers... she made bandages and knitted. Even during the bitter winter at Valley Forge she stayed with the army, and worked day and night knitting socks, patching clothes, and making shirts for the men. An old letter comes down to us from those days, telling about a group of ladies who made a call on Martha when she came to Valley Forge. The visitors put on their most elegant clothes to call on the wife of General Washington, but, according to the letter, when they arrived they found her dressed in a speckled apron," knitting for the soldiers. She received her visitors graciously, but as soon as the greetings were over, she went right on knitting!

Each year when spring came, Martha returned to Mount Vernon to supervise the farm. During the war she lived very frugally at Mount Vernon, and set the best kind of an example for those about her. She cut out all luxuries of living-- for instance, her clothes were very simple, and made almost entirely of home-woven materials. At one time she had her spinners ravel some old brown silk hose of General Washington's, and some old crimson damask chair covers, and then reweave the thread into a striped cloth from which she made herself two dresses.

When the British invaded Virginia, everyone believed they intended to capture and burn Mount Vernon. Martha's relatives and friends urged her to leave her home, but she refused to leave what she considered her post of duty. At last when the danger became very great she let herself be persuaded to go-- but she went only a few miles, and next day she was back in her home.

The closing days of the war brought tragedy into Martha Washington's life: the last of her four children, Jackie Custis, died of fever contracted at the battle of Yorktown. However, to make up for this loss, two of his children came to live with the Washingtons, and both Martha and George loved them as if they had been their own-- in fact, they legally adopted both children.

After the war, life was never quite the same at Mount Vernon. An endless

stream of relatives, friends, and admirers were always in the house, and in the true Southern fashion of that day the Washingtons provided elaborate hospitality for their guests. The burden of all this entertainment of course fell largely on the lady of the house. Just to give you an idea of what such entertainment meant, here's what Martha Washington served on one occasion, as it was described by a guest at the dinner: "The dishes were placed all around and there was an elegant variety of roast beef, veal, turkey, ducks, fowls, hams, etc.; puddings, jellies, oranges, apples, nuts, almonds, figs, raisins, and a variety of wines and punch."

The Washingtons had so much company, that in the later years of his life George wrote to a friend, "Unless someone pops in unexpectedly, Mrs. Washington and myself will do what I believe has not been done within the last twenty years by us -- that is, to set down to dinner by ourselves."

Although Martha and her husband had looked forward to spending the rest of their lives peacefully in their lovely home on the Potomac, in 1789 George was called to become the first President of the newly-formed United States of America. So Martha again had to leave Mount Vernon and establish a new home -- not an easy thing to do at the age of 58. As the wife of the President, her social duties were heavy. But even so her high position didn't exempt her from household worries, as you can tell from this advertisement which appeared in a New York newspaper for two months during the winter of 1789:

"A cook is wanted for the family of the President of the United States. No one need apply who is not perfect in the business, and can bring indubitable testimonials of sobriety, honesty, and attention to the duties of the stations."

When George Washington ended his service as President, he and Martha returned to Mount Vernon with great relief, and this time they were permitted to live out their lives as they wished. Of course Martha enjoyed the honors that had come to her husband, but both of them preferred their own rooftree to any presidential mansion, and Martha was very happy to get back to the duties of homemaker in her own home.